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ABSTRACT

Adolescent literature should deal with the problems of adolescents, should provide them with pleasure, and should say something to them. The adolescent novel is a bridge through a difficult age, a bridge from literature for children to literature for adults, and a bridge to major literary works. Adolescent novels can also be used to approach a study of literary techniques. (A number of adolescent novels are recommended, as are more mature novels of special interest to adolescents.) (TJ)

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We've been told that Americans are no longer reading--that film and video-tape have replaced books and periodicals as leisure time activities. If we accept these pronouncements as truth, English teachers (and reading teachers) should be revamping, revising, and retreading. Much of what we have been doing in our classes would be irrelevant. Yet book publishers continue to publish, and we continue to teach. Both publishers and English teachers, then, must have faith that the written word is not going out of style as a pleasurable activity or as a source of information.

It is interesting to note that two recent polls surveyed the adult reading public (age 16 and up). One, the Gallup poll, concluded that fiction is still the most widely read of the genres. It is doubtful if anyone would take issue with that conclusion. The other poll, done for the Book Industry Study Group by Yankelovich, Skelly & White, and indicating that more than half of the people in America do read, contained some interesting conclusions that seem relevant to English teachers in secondary schools, and especially relevant to the field of adolescent literature.

Four conclusions, three from the Yankelovich poll and one from the Gallup poll,* are:

1. The most important reason for reading is pleasure, with "general knowledge" as a close second.
2. Those who read books are the most active participants in other leisure time activities.
3. Fiction is the most widely read of all genres.
4. If the reading habit is not formed by the time one leaves high school, it never will be.

If we look briefly at these conclusions, we will note first of all that enjoyment is a key word. Elementary teachers should be aware that the only reason for teaching reading is to develop readers. Elementary children who read read for pleasure--the same reason that adults read. We can assume then that enjoyment or pleasure should be the key to adolescent reading, with information following as a close second.

The second conclusion, that those who read books are the most active participants in other leisure time activities, refutes the proverbial excuse of the non-reader. The non-reader says, "I don't have time to read," and the reader reads, watches television, plays tennis or golf, jogs, socializes, and generally participates in as many activities as possible. People do find time to do the things they want to do.

The third conclusion does not seem to be surprising. According to Thrall, Hibbard and Holman in A Handbook to Literature, "The chief function of fiction is to entertain, ... but it often serves also to instruct, to edify, to persuade, or to arouse. It is one of the chief devices by which man communicates his vision of the nature of reality in concrete terms." Thus, fiction responds directly to the two major reasons for reading.

The fourth conclusion, that the reading habit must be formed prior to leaving high school, puts the development of the reading habit on teachers and parents of children and adolescents.

If elementary teachers have succeeded, the teacher of adolescents needs only to continue a process already begun. Otherwise, one starts at a more basic step. But, the crucial point is finding the books that will bring pleasure and/or satisfaction to these young people whose interests differ tremendously. Some adolescents are in school only because of compulsory attendance laws; some are there because there isn't anything else to do; some want to go on to college (and here we could make many sub-divisions, dependent on reasons for enrolling in

a college or university). The point is that, if teachers accept the challenge of "educating all the children (and adolescents) of all the people," we have to find the books that will hold their interest, provide pleasure, and say something to them.

Adolescent literature, books written specifically for the teen-ager, usually responds to these three items. What books will hold the interest of adolescents? Adolescents, like children and adults, are egocentric. They want to find answers-- answers not to problems of the United States or the problems of the world, but to the problems they themselves have. These are many, and each new generation has to find its own way of solving them. Decades ago when the Great American Dream was still a believable inspiration, millions found their answers in the Horatio Alger books. But the Horatio Alger myth no longer works. The teenager has to look elsewhere to find solutions. Specifically the adolescents must recognize their own options and make their own decisions.

Since fiction is the most popular reading category, we need to look at the adolescent novel to see if it will help adolescents to find the options that they have in dealing with their problems. Some of the subjects of particular interest to teenagers are sex, pregnancy, homosexuality, drugs, divorce, prejudice, sanity, and the generation gap. Adolescent novels on these subjects have been and are being written.

Mr. and Mrs. Bo-Jo Jones by Ann Head, My Darling, My Hamburger by Paul Zindel, The Girls of Huntington House by Blossom Elfman, and If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin all deal with teen-age pregnancy. (Incidentally, pregnancy is a topic and condition that some parents naively believe will "go away" if teenagers are not exposed to it in books.) When students have read these or similar novels, they might be interested in reading My Antonia by Willa Cather. They will surely note that Antonia's "mistake" did not prevent her having a full and rewarding life. The strength and courage of Antonia, July, and Tish might be

compared to the strength and courage of an earlier American heroine, Hester Prynne. These books are just a few among many that deal with the problems of adolescents. It follows, then, that if adolescents are egocentric, the novels will hold their interest.

The second criteria on my list is pleasure. Will teenagers find pleasure reading these adolescent novels? The answer is an unqualified yes. People find pleasure doing things that interest them. That in itself responds to the question. Additionally pleasure comes when one's ideas are confirmed, or, in the case of non-confirmation, when one can find a glimmer of hope. That is why Susan Hinton's The Outsiders is a happier book--and therefore more pleasurable experience--than That Was Then, This Is Now. The former book ends on an optimistic note while the latter is pessimistic. The latter, however, is not without merit.

The third item in my criteria for books for teenagers is books that say something to them. If books provide them with information that will help them to make decisions about actions and values, the books do speak directly to the adolescents. As they observe the ways that the heroes and heroines deal with problems in the novels, the adolescents learn to cope with events and people in their own lives. The adolescents want books that deal with their lives now. Of course, in many instances, their own personal solutions will have an impact on their lives later. The period of adolescence is a difficult one--in many instances, it is a troubled period. Adolescent literature is, then, a "bridge over troubled waters."

There should be no doubt that the adolescent novel is a bridge from literature for children to literature for the adult. Literature for children (and some of it has been almost as controversial as literature for the adolescent) introduces the child to reading and its pleasures and understandings. If reading stops there, the reading habit may be lost; but how many thirteen to nineteen year olds are ready for The Sound and The Fury or The Trial? What can they read?

What do they want to read? Maybe the bridge at this point is only development or continuation of the reading habit. But that is important! Don't underestimate its value!

The adolescent novel is also a bridge to more mature literature because both the adolescent and adult novels, which frequently have similar themes, are usually more complex than the novel for the child. The multiple themes and multi-dimensional characters (involved frequently in various settings) give emphasis to the multiplicity of life in the interrelationships among people, thus pointing out that "no man is an island." The bridge, then, leads quite simply to the adolescent's being able to follow several diverse characters in different locales and understanding the influence and the thematic counterpoint of one set of characters and actions on another set of characters and actions.

There is still another bridge of adolescent literature and this is perhaps the one we as English teachers cherish most. We ask--How can we get students to read the major literary works? We want them to because we believe that reading the masters will make them happier and wiser individuals than those without familiarity with the world's great writing.

My Antonia by Cather has already been mentioned as a follow-up to some teenage novels. Goldengrove by Jill Paton Walsh can easily be used prior to studying Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Spring and Fall." Hopkins' poem with its sprung rhythm may appear difficult, but the teenagers who have read Walsh's novel seem to find an added dimension to the novel after studying the poem.

The Ox books by John Ney are about the poor little rich kid--the rich kid that so many youngsters envy until they read one or more of these books. Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Richard Cory" can easily be introduced as a companion piece to the Ney books. Moving from the Ox books to the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald is a natural step. The Great Gatsby explores, among other things, the life of the rich. Other Fitzgerald books also portray some aspects of the life of the well-to-do, a life that Fitzgerald himself envied.

Another subject that interests teenagers is the subject of divorce. Clearly related is the subject of step-parents. Chloris and the Creeps by Kin Platt, The Dollar Man by Harry Mazer, and Don't Look and It Won't Hurt by Richard Peck are just a few examples of books which involve the adolescent trying to cope with divorce and remarriage of parents, or the single parent. Hamlet too ponders about a stepfather. Although the Shakesperian drama involves a great deal more than coping with a step-father, this issue can easily and honestly be used to get the students to read Hamlet. Jeanette Eyerly's The Phaedra Complex might be used to introduce the Greek drama Hippolytus by Euripides.

Thus, the adolescent novel can be used to interest students in reading. From the adolescent novel, it is an easy step to Crane's Maggie and The Red Badge of Courage, to Dreiser's Sister Carrie and An American Tragedy, to Sinclair Lewis' Main Street, and to Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio. Maggie, Carrie, Clyde Griffiths, Carol Kennicott, George Willard, Studs Lonigan, Eugene Gant, and Ike McCaslin are adolescent and young adult heroes and heroines whose problems parallel those of today's teenagers. As these lives are explored, readers might be encouraged to look at characters from former years--the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet portrays teenage lovers; love on various levels can be explored in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales or in Tolstoi's Anna Karenina.

In addition to using adolescent novels as a thematic approach to more mature novels, these novels can also be used to approach a study of literary techniques. One of the most difficult techniques for young adults to understand seems to be point of view. The Pigman by Paul Zindel is an excellent example to use to explain it. The Hundred Dollar Misunderstanding by Robert Gover is another book in which alternate chapters are narrated by different persons. The latter book can also be used to study satire.

We must remember that the main reason to look at these literary techniques is to increase one's understanding of the literary work. We as English teachers

have probably done a great deal to destroy reading as a pleasurable experience. Thurber illustrates this practice in his essay, "Here Lies Miss Groby." Don't be a Miss Groby!

To recap briefly, it is our responsibility to use the adolescent novel to introduce great literature, to foster the reading habit, to provide pleasurable experiences, to help students make decisions about actions and values. Use the adolescent novel as a "bridge over troubled water," as a bridge to mature reading, and as a bridge to life. Today's teenagers will be the adults polled in the future. If we succeed, the percentage of adult Americans who read should increase.

* For additional information, see the polls and also Walter Arnold's "America's Reading," Saturday Review (January 20, 1979), 66.